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AUTHOR Hamilton, David
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ABSTRACT

Official curriculum thinking in the United Kingdom is at odds with one individual's understanding of contemporary curriculum theory and contemporary curriculum practice. An exposition of the reasons underlying this is explored. Assumptions about the linearity of teaching and learning (that seem to be contained in the official curriculum) are not so readily accepted by British educators. Fundamental problems with the nature and meaning of curriculum need to be debated and discussed. A 7-item list of references is included. (DB)

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# The Uncommon Sense of Curriculum Studies

David Hamilton
Department of Education
University of Liverpool
Liverpool L69 3BX
England

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David Hamilton
Department of Education
University of Liverpool
Liverpool L69 3BX
England

'How to learn historical facts in the right order'

This headline appeared in the Times Educational Supplement (6th April, 1990). It is, I suggest, an important sign of the times, for three reasons. Note the attention given, respectively, to 'facts', 'right' and 'order'. To a naive reader, therefore, the headline suggests that curricula comprise facts taught sequentially with reference to a 'right'(i.e. normative) order.

The TES headline encapsulates official curriculum thinking in the United Kingdom. But it is at variance with my own understanding of contemporary curriculum theory and contemporary curriculum practice. By design or default, therefore, the TES headline underwrites a common sense, rationalist and unproblematic view of curriculum that, ultimately, confounds and devalues the work of contemporary curriculum practitioners. In short, 'curriculum studies in the age of the statutory curriculum' has become highly

problematic - for at least the following reasons.

1. Assumptions about the linearity of teaching and learning are not so readily accepted. Here are two examples:

> (i) Broadly speaking, the behaviourist model of reading as a perceptual, linear process has been supplanted by a cognitive, 'global' model which posits an active reader participating in a constructive relationship with the text.
>
> (de Castell, Luke & Egan, 1986, p. x)
>
> (ii) It is arguable whether mathematics possesses a hierarchical structure....Of course hierarchies do exist on a local level ....[But] this does not tell us anything however, about the global nature of the subject, still less about the psychological and pedagogical implications of such relationships.
>
> (Noss, Goldstein & Hoyles, 1989, p. 111-2)

Further, equivalent assumptions about non-linearity are also entertained in the current literature on 'hypertexts' (computerised non-linear documents, see McAleese, 1990) and in the aphorism - attributed to Alain Robbe-Grillet - that 'narratives have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order'.

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2. Post-piagetian constructivist psychology - which underpins much National Curriculum thinking in the UK - is also at variance with linear curriculum models. Anne Qualter, for instance, has suggested that 'constructivism is in crisis (it doesn't know it) because of the conflict between learner centred teaching and notions of a direction in which to go and a target to reach'(personal written communication, 15th May,.1990). Similarly, Russell's discussion of 'alternative' conceptions of children's thinking self-consciously uses an epigraph from Piaget's The Child's Conception of the World (1929):

> In psychology as in physics there are no pure 'facts'... independent respectively of hypotheses by means of which the mind examines them, of principles governing the interpretation of experience, and of the systematic framework of existing judgements into which the observer pigeon-holes every new observation' (Russell, forthcoming).

3. Late twentieth-century educational thought also seems to have lost sight of the fact that curricula are (or were) unified entities, not uncomfortable aggregates of disparate subjects. Stuart MacLure - with reference to recent innovations in England and Wales - has noted that 'there has been no attempt to do the sums - no conception of "the curriculum as a whole".' (TES, 27the April 1990). It is perhaps inevitable, therefore, that in an attempt to integrate

earlier official writings, the National Curriculum Council document on The Whole Curriculum (1990) has great difficulty in reconciling the different meanings conventionally attributed to curriculum descriptors such as 'whole', 'basic', 'foundation' and 'common'. Indeed, the clearest example of this confusion is its malapropism that 'extra-curricula activities' have 'successfully formed part of the curriculum of every school' (p. 6)![1]

4. Educational studies in the United Kingdom, if not elsewhere, has consistently conflated 'curriculum' and 'teaching'. The net result is that the focus of curriculum studies cannot easily be distinguished from the focus of teaching studies. Even the Journal of Curriculum Studies is guilty of this reductionism insofar as it offers to publish 'original, refereed contributions to the theory and practice of, and policy-making for, curriculum and teaching'. What, then, is the difference between a Journal of Curriculum Studies and a Journal of Curriculum and Teaching studies? And, if a journal conflates these concepts, where is it possible to publish articles that seek to clarify their distinctiveness?

5. A final problem of categorization, also pertaining to the

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[1]Malapropism: 'ludicrous misuse of word, especially in mistake for one resembling it' (OED). I assume that 'extra-curricular' has been incorrectly used in place of 'extra curricular'.

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Journal of Curriculum Studies, is that there seem to be growing differences between United Kingdom and USA conceptions of curriculum and curriculum studies. In recent years, for instance, I have sometimes wondered why certain articles have made it to the pages of JCS. I was unsure, for instance, why they were considered 'curriculum' articles. I doubt whether there is a single explanation for my unease. Nevertheless 'post-modernist' (post-Tylerist?) thinking in the USA (e.g. Cherryholmes, 1988; Giroux, 1990) seems to be associated with a blurring of the boundaries between 'educational studies' and 'curriculum studies'. And in Britain, this blurring is reflected in the (apparently) decreasing role that 'curriculum studies' plays in the curricula of initial and in-service teacher education.

To conclude: For more than a decade I have sought to inform my practice through a measure of curriculum clarification. Initially, I wondered 'What is a curriculum?' and 'What is the relationship between curriculum and teaching?'. Later, as European editor of the Journal of Curriculum Studies I was forced to identify - at least in my own mind - the boundaries of the curriculum field. Finally, the emergence and official endorsement of the National Curriculum in England and Wales has posed another set of conceptual problems (eg. 'What is a national, basic, common or whole curriculum?'). And I still believe that such questions have an worthwhile place in the curriculum curriculum.

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